

This is not the first time people have met to consider whether the claims Jesus made about himself were true.

In fact the earliest surviving fragment of John's Gospel contains an account of the trial of Jesus by Pontius Pilate in which Pilate is recorded as saying to Jesus: "You are a king, then!". Jesus answers, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

And a very skeptical Pilate then asks one of the greatest questions of all time: "What is truth?"

That's the question I ask myself at the start of every case I work on. Not what does my client say happened, or what does my opponent say happened or even what does the available evidence suggest happened. No. I'm much more interested in the truth of what actually happened.

You see, people sometimes have a tendency to confuse the the evidence of what happened with the truth of what happened ... But truth and evidence are two very different things.

Lawyers and judges may strive to determine the truth based on the evidence but, make no mistake, cases are decided on evidence - not truth.

Sometimes crimes go unpunished. Not because they weren't committed, but because insufficient evidence was left behind to persuade a jury, beyond reasonable doubt.

But insufficient evidence that something happened is not the same as sufficient evidence that nothing happened, and the same is true of historical events.

Some historians once questioned whether Pontius Pilate ever existed, or whether he was just a fictional character created as part of a story designed to teach wisdom or repackage philosophy. That changed with the discovery of the Pilate stone in 1961, and most historians now accept that Pontius Pilate really was the Roman prefect of Judea in around 26-36AD.

The same is true of Jesus. While some once questioned his existence, most mainstream historians now accept that:

- (1) Jesus lived in Palestine during the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius
- (2) He had a reputation as a great healer
- (3) He was crucified by order of Pontius Pilate in either 30 or 33AD;
- (4) He really was dead when the Romans finished crucifying him
- (5) He was buried in a tomb belonging to a local religious leader [Joseph of Arimathia]
- (6) Some women claimed to have found his Tomb empty when they visited it after his death; and
- (7) Some of Jesus's followers even claimed to have seen Him alive again after He died.

For example, E P Sanders of Duke University (who appears to be an agnostic), once said:

"There are no substantial doubts about the general course of Jesus' life: when and where he lived, approximately when and where he died, and the sort of thing that he did during his public activity ... I shall first offer a list of statements about Jesus that meet two standards: they are almost beyond dispute; and they belong to the framework of his life, and especially of his public career: Jesus was born c. 4 BCE, near the time of the death of Herod the Great; he spent his childhood and early adult years in Nazareth, a Galilean village; he was baptized by John the Baptist; he called disciples; he taught in the towns, villages and countryside of Galilee (apparently not the cities); he preached 'the kingdom of God; about the year 30 he went to Jerusalem for Passover; he created a disturbance in the Temple area; he had a final meal with the disciples; he was arrested and interrogated by Jewish authorities, specifically the high priest; he was executed on the orders of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate. We may add here a short list of equally secure facts about the

aftermath of Jesus' life: his disciples fled; they saw him (in what sense is not certain) after his death; as a consequence, they believed that he would return to found the kingdom; they formed a community to await his return and sought to win others to faith in him as God's Messiah."

(E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. Penguin Books, 1993, p.11).

Elsewhere Mr Sanders said:

"That Jesus' followers (and later Paul) had resurrection experiences is, in my judgement, a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences I do not know."

(E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. Penguin Books, 1993, 280.)

None of those propositions require any belief in God, or miraculous events, to be accepted and, as we have heard tonight, we have quite early and reliable evidence, in historical terms, for most if not all of those basic facts. The controversy really relates, not to what the evidence is, but rather to the conclusions that can or should be drawn from it.

Both Gaby and Han have suggested that the onus of proof rests on Christians to prove the resurrection because it is they who assert something contrary to the laws of science happened.

But that's not the way life works. We aren't in court, and there is no jury here to decide for you what you should believe.

You are the jury, and you must each judge for yourselves what evidence would be sufficient for you to believe the resurrection occurred, and what the truth is about what happened after Jesus died.

The starting point is to realise that we each view the world through an ideological prism. Whether it is a prism of faith based on our upbringings and religious beliefs; or a prism of skepticism based on our education and life experiences, both types of prism can shape our view of the evidence.

That is why the same evidence that is so faith affirming to a Christian can be so unpersuasive to an atheist, and why a skeptical argument can sound so compelling to an atheist but not a Christian. The greatest danger in having such a prism lies in not knowing it exists.

In fact, you have probably all heard the saying that 'Justice is blind', and you may all recognise the blindfolded image of Justicia on the screen behind me. She is blindfolded because, if she wasn't, she may notice the difference between a prince and a pauper and thereby allow preconceived prejudices, perceptions or assumptions influence her judgment of the evidence.

And we all face the same challenge.

If we allow our faith, or our skepticism, to influence our view of the historical evidence too much, that may dictate the result without us even realising it. For the Christian, this may manifest itself as blind faith that requires belief not only in God and biblical truths, but also in every platitude or apologetic argument espoused by the authors of Christian books, regardless of their merit. For the Atheist, it may manifest itself as blind skepticism that requires belief not only in the laws of science and naturalism, but also disbelief of anything that cannot be rationalised with their own intellectual understanding of how the world works.

In either case, great care must be taken to prevent your prism from becoming your prison. A prison of the mind that prevents you from seeing the truth.

Jesus himself reportedly acknowledged this when, in the story of Lazarus and the rich man at Luke 16:31, he said: '... If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead'.

Christians believe that Jesus was talking about his own death and resurrection but, regardless of whether you believe that or not, the challenge is worth thinking about.

Is there any evidence that would convince you that the resurrection occurred, or is your skepticism so complete that, even if you could personally talk to Peter, James or Paul about what they saw and heard after Jesus died, you could still explain away what they told you by reference to grief, or visionary experiences, or mistaken identities?

What if you saw the risen Christ with your own eyes? Could you explain even that away as some sort of vision, or hallucination, or delusion of the mind? Would the only change to your lifestyle be an appointment for a checkup with your local doctor?

If so, then your prism may already be so thick and impenetrable that you are effectively blind. Not in the way that justice is, but more like the blind faith that is so often ridiculed by atheists.

You see, we all have beliefs, and our beliefs influence the way we see things. For many, there is already sufficient evidence for them to believe in something - the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Others may prefer to believe in nothing.

But regardless of what the current evidence is, or how you choose to interpret it, the truth will always be the truth - whether you believe it, or not.